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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of the elementary school counselor in addressing the problem of physical child abuse from a family systems perspective. The body of the paper falls into three distinct sections: (1) the evolution of the definition of child abuse and neglect including a brief history of this phenomenon; (2) models of intervention, with concentration on the social-interactional model (family systems approach); and (3) the elementary school counselor's role in intervention and prevention of physical child abuse. The major focus of the report is in the final section which considers the counselor's responsibility as extending to three constituencies of the school community: faculty, parents, and children. Emphasis is placed on not treating the child as a separate entity from the family. It is recommended that the belief in the value of prevention and intervention should be imparted by school counselors to administrators, teachers, and families. The report concludes school counselors should be people who are insightful, knowledgeable and sensitive, having eyes to see possible harm; ears to hear cries for help; and a tongue to speak out without hesitation when a child or adult is at risk. (ABL)

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THE ROLE OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GUIDANCE COUNSELOR IN THE INTERVENTION/PREVENTION OF PHYSICAL CHILD ABUSE

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Physical child abuse is a pervasive, multifaceted problem affecting children from all social and economic levels. The scope of the problem has exploded into public awareness over the last few decades. The number of reported cases of child abuse and neglect has increased steadily from the time that Gil (1970) reported his findings to the present day when the problem of phsyical child abuse has been found to occur yearly in 62% of American families ("Serious Abuse," 1985) with at least 1,000,000 children being maltreated (Mayhall & Norgard, 1983). The National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect (1984 b) attributes this statistic to three possible factors: "improved state data collection systems, greater public awareness, and a real increase in child maltreatment" (p. 25).

The sky-rocketing incidence of abusive situations carries far reaching implications regarding the most effective techniques in the treatment and prevention of abuse. The literature exposes various opinions in an effort to define, identify, treat and prevent abuse with all its ramifications and advances a variety of approaches to decrease child maltreatment. There are numerous theories, each with its own treatment approach, which postulate the most effective means of addressing the abusive situation. On this topic, Newberger, Newberger & Hampton (1983) state that "an adequate understanding of etiology is necessary in order to focus intervention efforts where they will be most effective" (p. 265).

In the past, most etiological reports concentrated on the personality factors in the parent, with little regard for the nature of disordered interactions between the parent and child (Wasserman, Green & Allen, 1983). Presently, there is a growing trend away from studying the

quality of parenting (in isolation) to a more transactional view, where the characteristics of the child are viewed in combination with the vulnerabilities of the parents as a way of understanding the disturbed parent-child interactions (Gaensbauer & Sands, 1979).

Thus, it appears from a review of current literature that newer theories of intervention and treatment of the abused are based on the belief that successful treatment of the child-victim should involve all immediate family members. This relatively new holistic method of intervention, the family systems approach, recognizes that the residual effect of maltreatment of children has profound consequences for the whole family (Johnson, 1980).

Since the elementary school counselor is often the one who is in the unique position to identify potential and actual abused/"at risk" children and their families, he/she would also be in a position to address the situation from a family unit orientation. Therefore, the school counselor would endeavor to gear programs to both parents and children, not exculsively to one or the other.

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to consider the role of the elementary school counselor in addressing the problem of physical child abuse from a family systems perspective. Therefore, the body of the paper falls into three distinct sections: (a) The evolution of the definition of child abuse and neglect including a brief history of this phenomenon, (b) models of intervention, with concentration on the social-interactional model (family systems approach), and (c) the elementary school counselor's role in intervention and prevention of physical child abuse.

The Evolution of the Definition of Child Abuse and Protection Legislation

McMurtry (1985) says that child maltreatment historically has escaped clear definition. The very existence of child abuse, he contends, is often a matter of subjective interpretation. Further, he believes it is a discrete phenomenon describing amorphous behavior of adults, often parents, that, when manifested to a different degree, might be considered characteristic of good parenting.

The identification and definition of abuse has a 2,000 year old history, commencing in the Biblical Book of Proverbs (Walters, 1974) in which it was stated that beating a child would save his soul from hell, to the modern day legislation defining abuse and neglect as "a threat to a child's health and welfare by physical or mental injury or impairment, sexual abuse or exploitation, deprivation of essential needs or lack of protection from these, by a person responsible for the child" (State of Maine Title Revised 22, 1983).

Historically, since the time of the Babylonian Empire, parents have been accorded unlimited rights over the welfare of their children. It was not until the 5th Century Code of the Visigoths that children were expected to receive humane treatment from their parents. With the Code's advent, the parent had duties toward the child and not simply unlimited power over her/him (Fraser, 1976).

Until the 19th Century, parents were allowed to exploit their children to help sustain the family by their wages. If children were abused or neglected in work places, the matter was considered extremely private and domestic, beyond the reach of legislation (Kadushin, 1974).

Advocacy for children's rights was born in the late 19th century when

the concept of "childhood" evolved, producing a greater understanding of child development and the components of adequate child care (Kadushin, 1974). When child protection laws were first passed, the types of mistreatment prescribed focused on physical injury and sexual assault. Gradually, the issue of neglect, both physical and emotional was introduced. Generally, these laws measured the standards of care below which no child should have to suffer.

As was seen in the preceding sections, children's rights traditionally have been subordinated to the rights of their parents, except in the cases of obvious and extreme physical abuse. In America, the famous case of "Mary Ellen" in 1874 began the transition to legislated protection of maltreated children. Up to that time, there were no laws in the U.S. to safeguard a child from being cruelly treated by caregivers, such as had been Mary Ellen's fate. Mary Ellen was brought to the attention of the courts, where preexisting laws preventing abuse to animals were invoked. Her guardians were sent to prison and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was established (Giovanni, 1979).

In the twenty-five years following the decision in the "Mary Ellen" case, over one hundred fifty agencies in this country were formed with the mission of "rescuing" children from abusive parents. Rudimentary laws were aimed at punishing the parents so that justice would be served.

The 1909 White House Conference on Children strengthened familial ties by proclaiming: "Home life is the highest and finest product of civilization," and "children should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons" (Trattner, 1979, p. 178). This philosophy

supported the Intrafamily Tort Immunity laws of the late 19th Century which made it impossible for minors to sue their parents in circumstances where the parents had negligently injured a child, or exceeded the bounds of reasonableness in administering discipline. The reason for the tort immunity was so that family harmony would not be disrupted (Mnookin, 1978).

A major shift in approach to child protection began to emerge in the early 1960's with the amendment to the Social Security Act, mandating every state to develop a plan to extend child protective services to political subdivisions of the state. Also, at that time, Dr. C. Henry Kempe coined the phrase "battered child syndrome" after a nationwide survey of the hospital treatment of injured children. Kempe reported inadequate detection and reporting, as well as a lack of generally accepted definitions of abuse (Hurt, 1974).

From 1965 to 1968, Dr. David Gil of Brandeis University produced his well-documented national studies on violence against children (Gil, 1970). He found that over three million adults had personal knowledge of an incident within the preceding year in which a child had been physically impaired or killed by a parent or caretaker. However, in 1967 only 5,993 cases of abuse had been reported, and in 1968 only 6,617 had been recorded in the central registries of the fifty states. This confirmed that child maltreatment was under-reported and led Gil to conclude that in American culture of the 1960's there existed a certain amount of societal approval of physical punishment and a certain amount of abuse was considered normal in child rearing (Gil, 1970; Hurt, 1974; Seaberg, 1980).

These findings contributed to raising the national consciousness to the occurrence of child maltreatment. The 60's and 70's witnessed tremendous progress in reporting cases of abuse, development of public laws and of a "helping-through-social-services" philosophy (Mnookin, 1978, p. 318) which had the welfare of the child as primary goal.

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1970 (P.L. 93-247) established the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect with the mandated function that it "acts as the principal focus for Federal activity in developing policies, plans, and programs related to the prevention, identification, and treatment of child abuse and neglect" (National Center, 1984a). "These laws mandate the reporting of suspected maltreatment, provide penalties for failure to report, provide immunity to reporters from legal actions associated with the report, and define reportable conditions" (DHS Publication 20-01016, 1984, p. 11). In 1978 the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act was amended to include sexual exploitation in its definition of abuse (Family Law Reporter, 1983, p. 9). Further elaboration of the definition of abuse was adopted in H.R. 1904 which amended it "to include definition of 'medically indicated treatment' applied to Baby Doe cases" (National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1984) which "requires states receiving federal child abuse funds to set guidelines that will force doctors to treat such infants" ('Baby Doe', 1984). Over the last century, each state has enacted laws to protect children from abusive parents, and legal representation has been accorded a child-victim in the court proceedings.

Today, American family law generally presumes that a parent wants and

does act in the child's best interest (Mnookin, 1978). Fraser (1976) reports that this presumption is overcome only when the facts in the particular case dramatically indicate otherwise, such as in the case of serious physical harm to the child. However, the presumption of right still remains with the parent, and if there is any doubt, that doubt is resolved in favor of the parent.

The law presumes that children are in need of continuous care from at least one reciprocally affectionate parent. The law grants parents the right to raise their children as they see fit, and grants them the capacity, authority, and responsibility to determine what is good for their children (Goldstein, Freud, & Solnit, 1973, 1979). That inalienable, sacred, natural, and constitutional right (Fraser, 1976), stems from the reproductive tie between parent and child, which, however, does not necessarily establish a psychological tie. For the latter bond to evolve, the parent-child relationship must have the opportunity for continuous nurturing within the privacy of the family. Intervention is justified only when there has been serious bodily injury to the child, when there has been an attempt to inflict such injury, when there have been repeated failures of the parent to prevent such injury, or when the parent specifically requests the state to intervene (Goldstein, Freud, & Solnit, 1979).

The understanding of what constitutes child abuse has matured from a "general acceptance of corporal punishment in this country" (Giovanni, 1979, p. 243) as a function of parental autonomy to the realization that children have a right to protection from the state when parents inadvertently relinquish that role responsibility. The children's rights

movement has made many strides in the last century, and justifiably so. This advancement has brought into sharper focus the extent and limits of the parents' rights over their children. Since child abuse probably will always be with us, the state and federal governments will continue to need to protect victimized children and to hold out the possibility for positive change in their families.

Models of Intervention/Prevention

Early studies placed the cause of abuse in certain pathological character traits of the abusers, such as a rigid and domineering personality, impulsiveness, immaturity, and low self-esteem. This view gave rise to the psychodynamic models of intervention. Other studies have advocated a sociocultural or social-psychological model with causal factors in the external environment, such as poverty, and lack of marital and social supports. A third view, social-interactional model, hypothesizes that both psychological and sociological variables interact to affect parent-child relationships (Webster-Stratton, 1985).

Increasingly, professionals are moving away from a single theory of causation to an interactive, multicausal approach (Newberger et al., 1983). The social-interactional or social-psychological model is such an approach. It is one which looks at patterned forms of interaction within the family as a whole and advocates intervention which changes inconsistent patterns of that interaction (Burgess & Conger, 1978). Webster-Stratton (1985) describes this model as one that

> emphasizes the importance of both the psychological and sociological variables and is concerned with how they interact and affect

> parent-child interactions. It is concerned with the lack of certain fundamental social and parenting skills in abusive parents as well as how the characteristics of the children themselves may be contributing to the punitive behavior of the parent. (P. 60)

This interactional approach is consistent with the family systems theory which asserts that each member of a family influences and is influenced by that family. The individual adapts to and contributes to stresses within the family system. Changes in one member contribute to changes in other members (Barr, 1982; Hollis & Woods, 1981; Justice & Justice, 1976; Mayhall & Norgard, 1983; Minuchin, 1974; Otto, 1982; Satir, 1983; Wells, 1981). According to this theory, "when violence occurs in the family, the family system is not working" (Mayhall & Norgard, p. 33). Intervention facilitates "the use of alternative modalities of transaction among members... and makes use of the family matrix in the process of healing" (Minuchin, p. 13).

Traditionally, in abusive families, parents and children have been treated separately, usually with psychotherapy, casework, play therapy, or foster care. A family systems perspective, however, implies treating the entire family (Kempe & Kempe, 1978; Tomlinson & Peters, 1981). "Only in extreme cases is it recommended that a member of the family be removed from the family unit in order to provide treatment" (Otto, 1982, p. 170). The major treatment goals from this theoretical framework are to stop the abuse, and to enhance the quality of parent-child interactions within the family structure (Wells, 1981).

Family Preservation is a value underpinning much of the child abuse legislation. It is the right of parent and child to have the opportunity

to establish psychological bonds, continuity of care, and a nurturing environment for growth and development. These are precisely the values which are promoted through the social-interactional model of intervention called the family systems approach.

The Elementary School Counselor's Role in Intervention/Prevention of Physical Child Abuse

From the preceding section, it can be noted that agreement does not exist as to the precise determinants of abusive behavior. It appears, though, that combinations of variables most likely interact to cause child abuse and that very often this interplay of variables occurs within the family structure. (Kadushin & Martin, 1981).

In order for school counselors to respond to abusive, "at risk" family situations professionally and competently, they must clearly differentiate between child maltreatment and ways of managing children, even though literature shows that this distinction can escape clear definition. This view is corroborated by McMurtry (1985) who indicates that child abuse can represent "an amorphous group of behaviors, that, when manifested to a different degree, might be considered characteristics of good parenting" (p. 42). He finds that no clear and useful etiology of child abuse is known. What compounds the difficulty is societal sanction for a certain measure of physical punishment in child rearing (Gil, 1970; Kadushin & Martin, 1981).

Not withstanding the above and the overall complexity of the phenomenon, the elementary school counselor's own understanding of the etiology of abuse will color her/his approach to intervention with

abusive or "at risk" families. Therefore, the most competent counselor will integrate all theoretical considerations and have as comprehensive a knowledge as possible based on research of current literature.

In the United States, elementary school counselors are at the forefront of efforts to improve the understanding of child abuse and to develop educational programs aimed at preventing and treating it (Gerler, 1988). School counselors are key persons in the prevention network. They often can be a turning point in the life and behavior of an "at risk" family.

Recognizing signs and symptoms of children "at risk" can prevent serious harm, even death. Counselors, having an understanding of the dynamics of child abuse, can aid in early recognition and detection of families who have this potential for abuse. Thus counselors can provide means of primary prevention (ASCA, 1988). In at least 70 percent of cases, early identification and intervention can make a positive change in the abusive family (Kaplan, 1980). Current knowledge of child abuse policies and procedures is a preventative "must" for counselors.

The elementary school counselor has the obligation and opportunity to assist "at risk" children and parents as well as to function as an in-service trainer for school faculty and administration. The counselor's role vis-a-vis these three segments of the school's community (students, parents, faculty) will next be addressed.

Children

Abuse has deleterious effects on the self-image of children and often blocks healthy physical and psychological development. Therefore, elementary school counselors need, first of all, to be advocates for

those children who have experienced abuse. Perhaps more importantly, aware that children who are abused or "at risk" step into classrooms daily carrying an inner burden, counselors need to be attentive to the special needs of these children who have been mistreated. In some instances, counselors may need to work with these children individually or in small groups. In some other cases they will need to be referred for more intensive treatment.

Research supports the need for prevention/treatment programs. Counselors should continue to advocate and work toward the implementation of effective treatment programs as well as the implementation of promising programs of prevention which have as their goal: enhancement of coping skills, which include improving self-esteem and self-concept, being able to recognize stress in their parents, accomplishment of age-appropriate tasks, being sensitive to cues that abuse may occur if the child's own behavior is not changed, communicating the child's needs to others especially to parents (Bavoleck & Comstock, 1983).

Parents

Another aspect of primary prevention within the scope of the elementary school counseling setting is the implementation of programs/support groups. In such groups, appropriate parenting skills for abatement of inappropriate parent-child interactions are taught. These workshops/programs focus upon parents acquiring alternative methods of discipline, handling anger and frustration, enhancing parenting skills, developing appropriate behavior management, enhancing self-concept, improving communication skills, accepting one's own strengths and weaknesses and learning appropriate non abusive forms of discipline and punishment.

School counselors need to be advocates for these programs, such as the Nurse Visitor Program, that show promise in preventing high-risk parents from becoming abusive. Another parent education program developed and studied by Golub, Espinosa, Damon and Card (1987) for groups of abusive parents offers the hope that preventive group programs can be effective. This program titled "Hugs 'n Kids,", depicts typical problem situations between parents and their preschool children. Counselors should be at the forefront in advocating and developing group programs like this one aimed at preventing abusive behavior among parents identified as potentially abusive.

Another "family-centered" parenting skills program is the Nurturing Program. The Nurturing Program for parents and children grew out of research and treatment efforts with families experiencing varying degrees of abusive and neglecting interactions. The purpose is clearly enunciated. "It is a comprehensive program tailored to remediate inappropriate parent-child interactions" (Bavolek & Comstock, preface, p. III).

The Nurturing Program and others like it address what Bavolek and Comstock (1984) cite as determinants of abuse - inappropriate expectations of the child, parental lack of empathic awareness of child's needs as well as the parental value of physical punishment and parent-child role reversal.

The Nurturing Program does tend to validate the use of a family systems approach to the treatment of physical child abuse. It is consistent with the holistic approach and utilizes it in the program mode. It is only one of many approaches to this societal problem and

admittedly would not work with all families; i.e., when the parent is mentally ill. However, it does promote family functioning and advocates that if positive change occurs in even one family member, the other members will also be affected for the better.

It is obviously important in programs such as the Nurturing Program to help parents develop positive communication skills and structure time to talk with their children, as well as with each other. Teaching parents to challenge the "musts" - faulty assumptions about parenting under which they operate - can enable them to reduce the stress they experience in that role.

Research shows that a large percentage of abusive parents were abused children (Bavolek & Comstock, 1984; Garanzini, 1984; Holmes, Barnhart, Cantoni & Reymer, 1976; Webster-Stratton, 1985). The cycle seems to be self perpetuating. The impact of maltreatment is often continued throughout life when abusive parenting behavior is replicated in future generations of children within the same family. "To offset the generational perpetuation of dysfunctional parenting practices, education in appropriate parenting and child rearing is viewed as the single most important treatment and intervention strategy" (p. 3). The basic assumptions of such educational programs are consistent with the family systems approach. They maintain that all members of the family should be involved in the treatment process; that dysfunctional parenting behavior is learned and can be substituted with nurturing ones, that appropriate and inappropriate parent-child interactions exist on a continuum where all families manifest some degree of dysfunction; that the growth of self is essential in both parents and children; and that a child is never too

young to learn skills in appropriate parenting and nurturing (Bavolek & Comstock, 1983).

Many authors maintain that counselors as parent-educators can reassure parents especially "at risk" ones, that children need limits by emphasizing that parents must negotiate their differences privately so that the two can function consistently as a parent-team. Teaching parents to plan ahead, set contingencies, and follow through with consequences may be most helpful for these families. The setting of goals by parents for their own child-rearing behavior contributes to their own experiences of behavioral change as well as those of their child/children (Getz et al., 1988).

The changes in family life in today's society help to explain the proliferation of parent education materials. With the demise of the extended family as a predominant family structure, there are fewer intergenerational guidelines and supports for parenting (Getz & Gunn, 1988). Divorce and remarriage have created greater numbers of single-parent families and step families, which show need for unique educational services (Yehl & Laz, 1985).

Parents undergoing family transitions and struggles often seek interpretations, guidance, support and direction. Frequently, school counselors are the professionals to whom parents turn for this assistance. As the focal point of interaction among children, parents, teachers, the school and the community, the school counselor is in a unique position to identify needs and resources and to provide support, services, or referrals as deemed appropriate. Teaching parent education courses is one way for school counselors to function in a consultant role with families.

Faculty and Administration

Although, initially, counselors may be more likely to recognize the signs of abuse, teachers are more often the recipients of children's disclosures because of their daily contact. When guidance counselors give teachers the information and assistance they need, more children are likely to be helped. Because school counselors already play a consultation role in their schools, they are the logical choice for providing to teachers and administrators the assistance and training they need to understand the dynamics of abuse and abusive parents, and to develop a non-judgmental attitude which will allow them to react more appropriately in abusive situations.

The elementary school counselor, whose functions include staff counsultation and inservice training, first would need to obtain program approval from the school administrator. Administrators who may be hesitant about discussions of abuse may be more responsive after learning about community studies that indicate how widespread abuse is, occurring as it does in all social and racial classes, and thus being relentlessly democratic (Butler, 1978; Finkelhor, 1987).

Once permission for the inservice workshop/program has been obtained, the counselor, in faculty meetings and inservice days, needs to provide teachers with information regarding what consititutes abusive behavior, identification of "at risk" families, and information concerning state laws, reporting procedures and resources available for victims and their family.

Without outside intervention, child abuse can become progressively worse. Early intervention can prevent damage. If counselors are to aid

teachers/administrators in preventing abusive behavior, they must teach them to recognize the following "at risk" factors between parent and child which can be observed:

- hostility of parent towards the child
- rough handling of child
- undo spanking
- lack of supervision
- signs of medical neglect
- parental lack of concern for child's injury or condition
- hygiene neglect
- parent appears depressed
- child appears depressed
- child appears to be difficult to handle
- no signs of attachment/bonding with child
- malnutrition
- marital discord
- alcohol or drug abuse

The battle against child abuse is a difficult one. Clearly classroom educators, who are an important frontline resource for early identification and prevention/intervention in this pernicious situation, need to be given all the help they deserve by the counselor.

Summary

The number of children and families experiencing the adverse ramifications of child abuse appears to be on the increase. This paper has addressed the role of the elementary school counselor in promoting an awareness of the complexities of this problem and in imparting the skills

and techniques necessary to assit in its prevention/intervention. The body of the paper considered the history and etiology of this societal issue, current abuse legislation and models of intervention; since to be effective in this role counselors must be well informed in all of these aspects regarding child maltreatment. The major focus of the work is in the final section which considered the counselor's role responsibility as extending to three constituencies of the school community; faculty, parents and children with emphasis being placed on not treating the child as a separate entity from the family.

Finally, school counselors should be people who are insightful, knowledgeable and sensitive, having **eyes** to see possible harm; **ears** to hear cries for help and a **tongue** to speak out without hesitation when a child or adult is at risk. School counselors should be people who believe the truth of the maxim, "an ounce of prevention/intervention is worth a pound of cure," and impart that belief to the administrators, teachers and families in the school communities in which they serve.

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